

COMM 2-11  
ch/6

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Evaluation of Suggestion No. 59-81

1. For the second time within a month, a suggestion has been made for the simplification of documentation in ORR reports. This in itself is an indication that the current system is not completely satisfactory. The procedures recommended in Suggestion No. 59-81 have the qualified approval of the D/GG editors and would work well for most of the reports of the Division. It is approximately the same system that has been used satisfactorily in Department of Agriculture publications for at least 25 years. The author of the suggestion, however, actually brings up two problems. The first -- over documentation -- is specifically mentioned in the second sentence but is not considered thereafter. The second problem -- documentation procedures -- is the subject of the remainder of the memo.

2. The problem of over documentation is well worth further consideration since it is a common failing. Documentation of the obvious interrupts the train of thought for the reader without serving any useful purpose. A reduction in the number of references to sources would also simplify the work of authors, editors, and typists.

3. The second problem -- documentation -- has long been under consideration by the D/GG editors. The system described in Suggestion No. 59-81 has been tested and found to have many merits. Bibliographies are shorter; source references within the text do not necessarily have to be renumbered whenever a reference is added to or removed from the manuscript copy; and chances of error are materially reduced. The reader, in turning to the bibliography, always finds the complete reference rather than "ibid" or "op cit;" which may refer him to the preceding citation or to "17 above." The bibliography as a whole would also give a clearer impression of the amount and quality of the literature upon which a report is based.

4. No system of documentation, however, is perfectly adapted to all types of reports. The major objection to the suggested system is the cluttering up of a report with lengthy references. With care, this objection could be reduced considerably. For example, if more

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than one source is required to substantiate a statement, they could be referred to as 36, 37, 38/ rather than 36/ 37/ 38/. In some cases, such a multiplicity of references may be the result of over documentation. If the same information is given in the three sources, it may be so generally available that no citation is needed, or a reference to the most authoritative of the sources might suffice. For tables and graphics, the problem is even simpler. In both cases, references in ORR reports commonly appear in footnotes, where a lengthy reference is not likely to disconcert the reader. Other objections to the suggested system could certainly be raised and would have to be considered as they arise.

5. Even though there are a number of correct methods of documenting research, no single method can completely meet the needs of all types of reports. It is essential, however, that ORR maintain certain standards; but within these standards there is room for some flexibility. While retaining the general format now in use the author might be permitted to follow either the current method of documenting his report or the method described in Suggestion No. 59-81, depending on which was better adapted to his specific problems. The only explanation needed would be a simple change in the wording of the standard footnote to the first numbered reference in the text.

6. The D/GG editors recommend that the method of documentation suggested be further considered and tested before it is either adopted or rejected.

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